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ABSTRACT

The Communication I course described in this paper effectively incorporates peer Teaching Assistants selected from within the community college environment. The course consists of: (1) a Writing Skills Lab covering twelve areas of basic skills, staffed by an instructor and five peer Teaching Assistants; and (2) a Writing Skills Workshop in which students apply grammatical skills learned in the Writing Skills Lab and develop organizational and analytical writing techniques. The "peer" element is singularly important in this environment. Students in the community college encompass a wide range of ages and backgrounds. Teaching Assistants likewise vary in age and outside careers. The peer Teaching Assistants, by virtue of their "student" similarity, can provide important emotional and psychological support to foster more comfortable corrections and tutorials in technical writing skills. A well-designed Teaching Assistant practicum is critical to the success of this course. After skill training and orientation, constant monitoring of peer Teaching Assistants is necessary. However, the benefits of the system far outweigh any difficulties encountered in the total process. (JDS)

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Peer Teaching Assistants and English Composition in the Community College

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Abstract

The Communication I course described in this paper effectively incorporates peer Teaching Assistants selected from within the community college environment. The course begins with an initial evaluation process, during which students are placed in a writing skills program that utilizes self-contained units with a controlled composition approach. Students then receive corrections and tutorials in technical writing skills from peer Teaching Assistants who have been trained in the skills material and carefully oriented for this role.

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The concepts of individualized, self-paced learning, that is, The Personalized System of Instruction, grow naturally out of the wide range of student skills, educational backgrounds and career interests at an urban community college. The diversity of baseline skills is particularly apparent in a freshman writing course. This paper will describe a program in freshman English (Communication I) which utilizes peer Teaching Assistants in a Keller Plan approach to develop individual writing skills.

Most of the students entering Bunker Hill Community College need to develop some aspect of their basic writing skills. A number of students require a thorough review of all technical skills, including sentence structure, punctuation, etc. Many of these students require what is often termed "developmental" or "remedial" work. A number of others, however, simply need to study a few selective skills and develop more advanced writing objectives, such as logical organization, sentence manipulation and style. The individual needs of all these students must be met within the same course.

This Communication I course, developed over the past year, consists of a Writing Skills Lab which covers twelve areas of basic skills, staffed by myself, aided by five peer Teaching Assistants. The other half of the course consists of a Writing Workshop in which students apply the grammatical skills learned in the Lab, plus develop organizational, analytical writing techniques. In the Workshop, students complete structured writing assignments which are discussed and evaluated during individual conferences with me. Special arrangements are made for small groups and

conferences in the Workshop; but the broad range of basic skills problems are dealt with in the Skills Lab, during which groups of 25 to 35 students work on their individual programs. The conferences in the Workshop help me keep in contact with each student's progress, since in the Lab, students may choose to work with one or more of the T.A.'s most of the time. In that case, I see little of their skills progress until the Workshop, where it is applied in their writing. Aside from my maintaining close contact with each student's progress, the Workshop also serves as a quality check on the T.A.s' instruction.

At the beginning of the semester, individual student needs are evaluated through writing samples and discussed in conferences. Students are placed in a writing skills program ranging from 1 to 12 steps. They are assigned those skills steps which are indicated by their writing, though many elect additional modules to review material and build their confidence. The materials used in both the Lab and Workshop are self-contained modules that have been developed in the Department of Communications at the college.

The Lab material covers basic technical skills in a controlled composition approach. The controlled composition technique has been widely utilized in E.S.L. education (English as a Second Language) and our material is specifically adapted from the method employed in Write Me a Ream, published by Columbia Teacher's College. The Lab sequence consists of a series of cumulative steps, beginning with simple copying and proofreading, and progressing through sentence structure, verb and phrase manipulations, to basic paragraph development. Students are required to recopy a

passage and make one grammatical change throughout: for example, insert punctuation, or change the subject from singular to plural and the resulting verb and pronoun references. After completion of the assignment, students go to a correction table in the Lab and receive immediate feedback on their work by one of the Teaching Assistants or myself. Two or three of the T.A.'s are scheduled to assist me in every Lab session. The mastery criterion for each step consists of no more than one grammatical error. Assignments from William Strong's Sentence Combining are included in the Lab sequence to help sentence and phrase manipulation. The theoretical foundation of this book is Francis Christensen's research on "The Generative Rhetoric of the Sentence." Supplementary learning materials are also available for difficult modules. One variant has been made on the usual PSI format; that is, the learning and testing processes take place simultaneously. Since nearly everyone requires additional versions of a step to meet mastery, students are more relaxed about the testing process. In fact, they often ask for an additional version to gain more confidence in a particular skills area.

The crucial element in the Lab is the incorporation of peer Teaching Assistants. They help provide immediate feedback to aid the learning process and reduce the "student-resource" ratio. By having three or four "resource centers" in the person of the T.A.'s or myself, students can receive immediate, individual attention: correction of their papers, answers to their questions and tutorials. With more "resource centers" available for corrections, I can deal with special problems in conference within the Lab.

The role of the Teaching Assistant in this course is

considerably different from the usual "proctor" in a PSI course. As the name "Teaching Assistant" and the previous reference to the role of "resource center" implies, the T.A. must possess a special set of skills. The actual corrections are more difficult than simple multiple choice or fill-in questions. Within the corrections and explanations in the Skills Lab, there is a certain amount of novel language generation that requires on-the-spot assessment by the T.A.'s. This is especially true in the Sentence Combining work which involves manipulations of phrases and modifiers: gerunds, participles, absolutes, etc. The burden of grammatical explanation sometimes falls on the T.A. because direct grammatical instruction in the traditional sense does not occur in the skills material. Manipulations are more intuitive, rather than the traditional rule/example presentation. At times the difficulties are further accentuated by the fact that many of the students who have serious writing problems lack formal grammatical background, linguistic awareness and personal confidence.

The "peer" element is singularly important in this environment. The students in the community college encompass a wide range of ages and backgrounds, and the Teaching Assistants likewise vary in age and outside careers. They are, however, "peers" of the students and in such a capacity, often create a more comfortable atmosphere in which students are encouraged to ask questions and seek tutorials. I feel that it is particularly important to employ community college students as Teaching Assistants, not persons outside the college, such as graduate students or interns. The peer Teaching

Assistants, by virtue of their inherent "student" similarity, can provide important emotional, psychological support to foster more comfortable question and answer situations. The Open Admissions policy and the mix of students in the community college introduce certain emotional/attitudinal problems that require particular attention. Individualized instruction with the "peer" element often provides the necessary support and instruction required for older, returning students, those in full professional occupations outside the college, and students whose academic backgrounds would normally exclude them from traditional colleges. In addition, the peer T.A. often serves as an incentive to his/her fellow students, a role model that is subtlely reinforcing.

My personal goal is not only to have students become competent writers, to be able to function in society and understand the ramifications of written expression, but to attain some degree of comfort in the writing process, to seek writing as a viable means for expression and communication. In short, to overcome the fear and dislike many students experience in picking up a pen. The peer Teaching Assistants are an important factor in fostering the relaxed atmosphere of the Lab and the sense of written competency as an attainable goal.

A well-designed Teaching Assistant Practicum is critical to the success of the course. Tutors must first of all be selected for their mastery of the skills material - in this case, they must be competent writers - and for their ability to communicate effectively with other people. The actual skill training or review must be completed between semesters because students may

begin at any of the steps, depending on their baseline skills, During the second semester of this year, students who served as Teaching Assistants for one semester, enrolled in an Advanced Teaching Assistant Practicum and assumed additional responsibilities: one of which was a skills review for new Teaching Assistants, including insights on tutorial methods they found useful in their initial T.A. experience. In this manner the advanced Teaching Assistant role functions comparably to the graduate student in most Keller Plan courses.

After skill training and orientation to the role of a Teaching Assistant, a constant monitoring process is necessary throughout the term. T.A.'s are required to keep a daily journal, noting individual student progress and problems; difficulties and successes in giving tutorials; and personal reactions to daily lab sessions. I read these journals several times during the semester and meet individually with the T.A.'s following journal submissions. In our conferences, personal objectives, as well as successes, are recorded. These objectives form the basis for subsequent conferences. Advanced Teaching Assistants are also required to keep a journal and focus on individual student progress. Their prior experience enables them to analyze problems in the Lab and student learning difficulties more thoroughly. All such notations provide additional feedback to me on individual students. A final paper summarizing the Teaching Assistant experience and suggesting course modifications is required of both new and Advanced T.A.'s. Peer Teaching Assistants may, in fact, be more receptive to a close monitoring process than graduate students or tutors culled from outside the college because they are actively

engaged as students in all other aspects of the school. This term, two second-semester Freshmen have effectively served as T.A.'s.

Although there are difficulties in delegating responsibility to Teaching Assistants, monitoring progress and insuring an even flow of communication, the benefits of the system far outweigh the difficulties. The inclusion of peer Teaching Assistants allows for immediate feedback and individualization: both of which are particularly necessary in a diverse community college population possessing varied baseline skills in writing. It is possible, even within the community college, to institute a peer Teaching Assistant program that effectively utilizes true "peers" from within the college environment. The Personalized System of Instruction is particularly well-suited to the needs of the urban community college.

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